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War in the Eastern Mediterranean

BY LOUIS E. FRECHTLING

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THE APPEARANCE of German planes in the Mediterranean region, beginning with the bombing of a British convoy in the Sicilian channel on January 10 and followed by attacks on British shipping off the Libyan coast and raids on the Suez Canal, marks a new phase in the European conflict. If the Nazi air units now based in Sicily prove to be the vanguard of strong German forces sent to bolster Italy's war effort, significant developments may be expected in the countries surrounding the Inland Sea.

During the first nine months of the European war, major hostilities took place in the northern part of Europe. In this theatre, Germany, moving its armies along interior lines of communication and employing its air force on short-range flights, was able to subdue its neighbors one by one. Then with all the northern part of the continent under his control, Hitler turned his war machine against the British Isles, which he apparently expected to conquer in short order by mass air raids followed by a cross-channel invasion. The British air force, however, prevented Nazi flyers from delivering a decisive attack, and the navy held the sea approaches to the Isles. The conflict in the north again became a war of attrition, with each belligerent attempting to destroy the enemy's industrial plants and sever its lines of supply.

Meanwhile, Mussolini had brought Italy into the war on June 10, when France was on the point of collapse. Once France was removed from the conflict, *Il Duce* looked for other conquests which would establish Italy's position as an equal partner in the Axis alliance and secure Italian claims to a large part of the Mediterranean and the adjacent shores of Africa and Asia. Slowly the campaign, first against the Suez Canal, and then against Greece, got under way, but in each case the Italian advance became a general retreat. During the early stages of Italian operations in Albania and Africa, Hitler stood aloof, possibly not unwilling to reduce Italy's prestige and strength. German strategists, moreover, were planning a concentrated assault on Britain and wanted to avoid fighting on several fronts. Ultimately, however, Germany had to intervene to stiffen the resistance of the Italian forces and pre-

vent a possible internal collapse. The two dictators now are pursuing a coordinated policy against the common enemy, Britain.

In this struggle sea power constitutes Britain's principal weapon, and it has proved effective against both Axis states. Although the Nazis, for the first time in history, stand on the Atlantic coast, they are cut off from overseas sources of supplies and markets by the British blockade. Only by wresting control of the high seas from the British navy can Germany hope to assume world power. Italy occupies the same position with respect to the Mediterranean that Germany, on a much larger scale, occupies with respect to the Atlantic. The exits of the ocean which the Italians call *Mare Nostrum* are dominated by the British at Gibraltar and Suez, and so long as Britain controls these two key points, any successes Italy might win in Africa or Greece would prove sterile. The Fascist empire would remain, as some Italian nationalists put it, "the prisoner of the Mediterranean." Similarly, any German successes in the Near East would be neutralized by the presence of a hostile British navy in the eastern Mediterranean.

AXIS OBJECTIVES

The Axis drive for supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean seems to have several immediate objectives. Both Hitler and Mussolini want to subdue Britain's allies, Greece, Turkey and Egypt, and dislodge the British from their strong positions in Egypt, Palestine, and the Mediterranean islands. As long as a powerful British naval and air force remains in the Mediterranean, the Italian mainland is open to attack and German troops strung out along the Danube are endangered.

Should the Axis powers, however, conquer the Near East, they would sever important British lines of communication and deprive the empire of some valuable, although not critical, sources of raw materials.¹ Since June, it is true, the Admiralty has attempted to run only a few convoys the length of the

1. In British economic strategy, the Near East does not play a vital rôle. Petroleum products from Iran, Iraq and the Persian Gulf are consumed locally and in India, but few shipments are now sent west of Suez. Similarly, the United States, Latin America and India are far more important sources of cotton than Egypt and the Sudan.

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Mediterranean, but there has been a substantial trade, especially in recent months, with Levant ports via the Suez Canal. If the Mediterranean were reopened to British merchant vessels, the question of Britain's shipping supply would be at least partially solved. On the other hand, Axis domination of the Near East would not only close the Mediterranean and the Red Sea to British cargo ships, but would also prove a serious threat to an extremely important supply line of the empire—the route from India and Australia through the Indian Ocean and around the Cape of Good Hope.

The Axis powers undoubtedly hope to find in the Near East substantial sources of critical raw materials. While the output of this region is relatively unimportant as compared with world production, the Near East could supply the marginal quantities of certain strategic products which would become increasingly important as the war continues.

PRODUCTION OF NEAR EASTERN COUNTRIES*

Product	Year	Per cent of world output†
Cotton	1937-38	7.3
Wool	1937	3.6
Olive oil	1938-39	8.2
Chrome ore	1937	16.3
Petroleum	1939	6.01
Phosphates	1937	3.6
Wheat	1938-39	3.7
Barley	1938-39	7.2
Tobacco	1937-38	3.0
Sesamum	1937	6.3

*Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Iran and Persian Gulf territories.

†Adapted from *Bulletin of International News* (London), February 24, 1940.

Germany and Italy, especially the latter, lack sufficient supplies of petroleum. In 1938 the countries now under Axis domination consumed approximately 22 million tons. Production of crude petroleum and artificial fuels, even with the addition of Rumania, is estimated at 14 million tons annually, leaving a deficit of 8 million tons which would be more than covered by the output of the Near Eastern fields.

PETROLEUM PRODUCTION IN THE NEAR EAST, 1939*

Country	Metric tons ooo omitted	Per cent of world production by volume
Iran	11,164	3.76
Iraq	4,399	1.48
Bahrein Is.	1,084	.37
Egypt	631	.21
Saudi Arabia	551	.19
TOTAL	17,829	6.01

*Adapted from U.S. Bureau of Mines, *International Petroleum Trade*, March 30, 1940. Roughly, a metric ton is the equivalent of 7 U.S. barrels of 42 gallons each. Cf. also, "Oil in the Middle East," *The Economist*, August 31, 1940, pp. 283-84.

Turkey contains numerous deposits of iron, coal and copper. It accounts for 16.3 per cent of the world's output of chrome ore, which is essential for the manufacture of high grade steel. Egypt and the Sudan, in normal times, export large quantities of cotton, which Italy particularly lacks.² Italy is already suffering from a deficiency in food, especially oils and fats,³ and Germany's food rations have been reduced for some months. In the Near East, Egypt could provide cottonseed oil, Syria large quantities of olive oil, Palestine citrus fruits, and Turkey barley, wheat and sesamum. Other countries in the region export food products in small quantities.^{3a}

Finally, military occupation of the Near East by the Axis powers would bring large areas within the boundaries of the new empires which the dictators hope to create. Mussolini has announced Fascist Italy's claims to absolute control of the Mediterranean and dominion over North Africa, the Red Sea region, and possibly the Arabian peninsula. Nazi Germany's aspirations are believed to extend over Turkey, Iraq, and the Persian gulf region.

PROGRESS OF WAR IN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

At the outbreak of the European war, the Allies expected that Italy would immediately take part in the conflict. They consequently concentrated their efforts on the organization of an army of over 250,000 in French North Africa, Egypt and Syria in preparation for the envelopment of Libya and Italian East Africa. At the same time, the army of the east was available for immediate movement toward the Balkans if Hitler attempted to strike in that direction. Mussolini bided his time, however, and Hitler confined his activities to northern Europe. The period from September 1939 to June 1940 in the eastern Mediterranean was characterized by watchful waiting, intensive preparation and rising expectation of open warfare.

The stalemate in the Mediterranean ended on June 10, when Italy declared war. The French were already in grave difficulties on the western front, and before the Allied forces could move against Italy, the Pétain government capitulated. France's defection left the British in a vulnerable position. By the terms of the Franco-Italian

2. Raw cotton is the outstanding Italian agricultural import. In 1936-38 Italy produced only 9 per cent of its cotton requirements. N. William Hazen, "Italian Agriculture under Fascism and War," *Foreign Agriculture*, November 1940, pp. 674-75, 693. In December it was reported that Italy's production of cotton goods could continue only a few months at full capacity, due to depletion of stocks. *Foreign Commerce Weekly*, December 28, 1940, p. 589. Cf. also *ibid.*, December 21, 1940, p. 571.

3. Hazen, "Italian Agriculture under Fascism and War," cited, pp. 694-702.

3a. Cf. P. W. Ireland, "The Near East and the European War," *Foreign Policy Reports*, March 15, 1940.

armistice French troops everywhere in the Mediterranean region were compelled to lay down their arms, and in Tunis and Algeria to withdraw from fortified positions along the Libyan border. British units in Egypt, the Sudan, Palestine and British Somaliland found their positions open to attack by superior numbers of Italians. On the sea the situation was equally grave. The important bases of Oran and Bizerta in French North Africa, Beirut in Syria, and Jibuti in French Somaliland were lost to the British fleet. The withdrawal of the French navy left the British units in the Mediterranean inferior to the Italians, and if the French vessels were turned over to Italy, the Axis fleets would outnumber the British navy.⁴ Accordingly, a French battleship, four cruisers, and smaller vessels were taken by the British in Alexandria harbor, and two battleships and a battle cruiser were put out of action at Oran on July 3.^{4a} Additional British units were brought into the Mediterranean from other waters, giving the Royal Navy numerical superiority.

In the summer and autumn of 1940, each of the belligerents launched an offensive in the sphere in which it was dominant, Italy on land and Britain on the sea. The Italians took the first steps in what was apparently designed as a gigantic pincers movement against Egypt. From Ethiopia (now part of Italian East Africa), Fascist units penetrated a short distance into the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and seized several posts, the most important of which was Kassala on one of the two railways running between the upper Nile and the Red Sea. British patrols fell back and began to harass Italian supply lines. On the Somali coast, an Italian invasion from French Somaliland resulted in the evacuation of a small British garrison of 7,000, since the defection of the French had made the British position strategically untenable.⁵ To the south, Italian units advanced into Kenya, thus establishing important bases for future penetration into British East Africa.

A greater threat to British bases was anticipated from Libya. There an army of 250,000 men under the veteran desert fighter, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, prepared to strike across northern Egypt to the Suez Canal. First, however, Marshal Graziani

had to be assured of his supplies, which were shipped from the Italian mainland to one of the principal Libyan ports, Tripoli, Benghazi or Tobruk; and then transported by truck over the well-constructed military highway which runs along the coast from the Tunisian to the Egyptian border. By September 14 Graziani felt strong enough to move forward from his bases at Bardia and Fort Capuzzo into Egypt. The British retired to Mersa Matruh, the railhead of the line from Alexandria, while the Italians advanced slowly to Sidi Barrani, 75 miles inside the border. There the invading forces halted to gather supplies and reinforcements for a drive across Egypt. While supplies and munitions in some categories were delivered, Graziani had difficulty in obtaining mechanized equipment, and therefore delayed his advance.⁶

On the sea British warships moved almost at will, interrupting Italian communications and seeking to engage the enemy. Generally the Italian vessels preferred to employ their superior speed to escape combat. The Fascist high command apparently wished to keep the fleet intact for the defense of Italy's long and exposed coast line. In the three engagements which have taken place,⁷ the British navy has proved its superiority over that of Italy. A crippling blow was struck by the fleet air arm at the Italian base of Taranto on the night of November 11-12, when at least two capital ships and two cruisers were badly damaged or sunk, thereby giving the British preponderance of strength in larger ships in the Mediterranean.⁸

In the air the two belligerents were more evenly matched, although observers has assumed at the outset that Italy possessed overwhelming air strength, with at least 2,000 first-line planes. Fascist bombers carried out raids on many fronts, and several spectacular long-range attacks on Haifa and the Bahrain Islands. British power in the air was inconsiderable in June but subsequently expanded as new and improved planes were brought over from Britain.

When the Italian advance into Egypt failed to develop rapidly, Mussolini, on October 28, launched an attack against Greece from bases in Albania.

6. For Graziani's report to Mussolini, explaining his army's reverses in North Africa, cf. *The New York Times*, December 23, 1940.

7. On July 9 a British fleet engaged an Italian force and claimed hits on a battleship and a cruiser. On July 19 an Italian destroyer was sunk in the Red Sea. A six-day battle from August 30 to September 5 proved inconclusive; but the Italian ships withdrew under fire.

8. Italy had 6 capital ships built and building in 1938, and now probably has 4. The British fleet in the inland sea is reliably estimated to include 7 capital ships and 3 airplane carriers, as well as lesser vessels. "Fleets: The British Commonwealth of Nations and Foreign Countries," Cmd. 5666 (London, H.M. Stationery Office, 1938); *The New York Times*, November 17, 1940.

4. At the time of the Franco-German armistice, the French navy included 7 capital ships, 18 cruisers, and about 50 destroyers. The addition of these ships to the German and Italian fleets would have given the Axis 19 capital ships to Britain's 15, 46 cruisers to Britain's 60, and 250 destroyers to Britain's 182. Edgar McInnis, *The War: First Year* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 234.

4a. Two French battleships, 2 cruisers, 8 destroyers and about 200 small craft were seized in English ports. *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, July 12, 1940.

5. The Italians crossed into British Somaliland on August 5. By August 19 the colony was in Italian hands. The British were able to evacuate most of their equipment and all their men.

This offensive was apparently designed to divert British forces from Egypt and to secure air and sea bases on the Greek peninsula. After penetrating a short distance into the Greek province of Epirus, the Italians were pushed back into Albania by a small, well-led Greek army supported by British planes and ships.

The concentration of the Italian war effort on Greece, and the increasingly effective British control of the central Mediterranean enabled the British and imperial army of the Nile to take the offensive early in December. For months a force composed of British, Australian, New Zealand, Indian, Polish and Free French troops had trained in the western desert and Palestine. Plans were perfected for co-ordination of the movements of the armored corps, mechanized infantry, air force, navy and fleet air arm. From Mersa Matruh the attack was begun on December 9. Sidi Barrani was surrounded and forced to capitulate on December 11. The Allied forces then moved westward, taking Bardia on January 5, 1941, Tobruk on January 22, and Derna on January 30. Bengazi, 300 miles from the Egyptian border, is the next major objective.

British successes in Libya were due in part to the fact that the Royal Air Force had obtained superiority in the skies above virtually all the coast of Italy's north African colonies. Over the sea, the rival air forces were more nearly balanced, but the Italian bombers were unable to interfere with the movements of British ships. The appearance of German planes in the Mediterranean theatre of war may drastically alter the situation.

STRATEGIC POSITION ON LAND

The strength of the British army operating in North Africa, the scale of the recent bombing raids on Libya and the Italian mainland, and the substantial support given to Greece indicate that in August or September 1940 the Inner Cabinet in London had made a fundamental decision of widest importance. This decision, apparently, was to launch a major campaign in the Near East, having for its objective the elimination of the Italians from Africa and a close blockade of Italy.

This was a difficult decision to reach. It meant an attempt to deliver a major blow at the Axis in a distant theatre of war and involved a diversion of badly needed material, planes, naval units, merchant shipping and food from the British Isles. In the last war Mr. Churchill's project for taking the Dardanelles had failed at Gallipoli. There was the possibility that the contemplated operation in the eastern Mediterranean, parallel in many respects, would also fail. The British Cabinet and high command,

however, evidently decided to take the risk.

Britain's position in the Near East after the fall of France, while much less advantageous than before, was not hopeless, and it has progressively improved since October. The Greeks, displaying unexpected powers of resistance, have prevented the Italians from overrunning their country and securing naval and air bases strategically placed on the northern Mediterranean coast. Turkey remains faithful to the British alliance, and only an unforeseen shift of policy would lead its government to yield to German threats. If the Turkish army cannot keep the Nazis from the Straits, it can at least furnish considerable resistance to an overland movement through Anatolia.

Turkey is also expected to assist in holding the British cordon around Syria, where a French army of perhaps 75,000 men, well-armed but lacking supplies, is encamped.⁹ Two Italian armistice commissions have unsuccessfully attempted to obtain control of the area, particularly its airfields and naval bases. The French military leaders, however, have resisted Italy's demands and await the orders of General Weygand.¹⁰

The eastern borders of Syria are covered by British troops in Iraq, a country allied with Great Britain but lukewarm in its support of the British cause. Other forces are stationed in Palestine, where a territorial army composed of units of Arabs and Jews is being organized. Arab-Jewish enmity has subsided, and there have been no armed conflicts recently. This development is due to the stern attitude taken by Britain, the mandatory power, and to the operation of the White Paper of 1939, under which the Jewish immigration has been limited, and regulations have been issued to restrict the purchase of Arab land by Jews. The concern of the Arabs has thereby been alleviated, while the Jews have subordinated their local grievances to the prosecution of the conflict in Europe.

British control of the lands around the Red Sea appears less certain. On the east coast lies Saudi Arabia, whose people and leaders have been subjected to Axis propaganda in recent years, and yet are held to a neutral course by the proximity of the Royal Air Force. Farther south is the Imamate of the Yemen, whose close relations with Italy date back to 1926.¹¹ Here again the dominant power of

9. The French army in Syria comprised between 100,000 and 150,000 men at the time of the armistice, *Bulletin of International News*, July 13, 1940, p. 850. Since then some troops have returned to France and others have crossed the border into Palestine.

10. The Vichy government on January 4, 1941 placed General Henri Dentz, the new High Commissioner for Syria, under the command of Weygand. *The New York Times*, January 5, 1941.

11. Italy has provided the Yemen with technical experts, tanks, anti-aircraft guns and small arms in recent years.

the British base at Aden has prevented any unfriendly demonstration.

On the western side of the Red Sea, the Italians have added the British and French colonies on the Somali coast to their East Africa empire. This solid block of territory covers about 733,000 square miles and has 12,500,000 inhabitants. Its present economic value is small, however, and Italian forces have had to depend on supplies brought through the Suez Canal before Italy's entrance into the war in June.¹² The army numbers 100,000, of whom possibly half are natives. Its advanced units in the Sudan and Kenya were forced to retire in mid-January in the face of a general British advance. Sudanese and Indian contingents pushed into Eritrea, and are now driving toward the important port of Massawa. On the Kenya front, South African and African colonial forces have increased pressure on Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland. In the highlands of western Ethiopia there is a growing revolt by tribesmen armed and trained by British agents.¹³

The defeat of France opened the western border of the Sudan to possible Axis infiltration from French Equatorial Africa.¹⁴ That danger was removed by the adherence of the administrators of the area to General de Gaulle and the Free French movement. Similarly, the decision of the Belgian Congo government to collaborate with London, eliminates the possibility of Axis intrigue on the borders of Uganda and Tanganyika.^{14a}

Looking westward from Cairo, the British position appears favorable. The threat to the Suez Canal is removed, and the possibility exists that all of Libya may be taken. Already Marshal Graziani has lost almost half of his army of 250,000 men, large dumps of supplies, and more than 300 guns. The British army, with mechanized equipment, can move rapidly along the coast, supplied by ship and by lorry along the excellent Italian highway. On the western side of Libya, General Weygand's army is

still in existence, necessitating the diversion of Italian troops to watch the Tunisian border.

STRATEGIC POSITION ON THE SEA

Sea power is a dominant factor in the Near East. A large majority of the inhabitants live near the sea; they depend on the sea for communication; their important agricultural and industrial enterprises are located near the sea. The belligerent who possesses sea power and can defend it from air attack commands a decided advantage.

While Britain has been dominant in the Mediterranean for two hundred years, it was seriously suggested by British strategists in the 1930's that the Mediterranean be abandoned if Italy were arrayed against Britain in a major war. The so-called "Cape school" of thought held that the striking power of the airplane and the submarine in narrow waters, such as the channel between Sicily and Tunis, made the central Mediterranean untenable for the British fleet in time of war. Large numbers of escort vessels would be needed for convoy duty in the inland sea, thereby diverting sorely needed ships from other and more important waters. Since Britain imported only 11 per cent of its foodstuffs and raw materials through the Suez Canal, it was argued that it could afford to abandon the sea altogether in favor of the longer but more secure route around the Cape of Good Hope. The "Mediterranean school," on the other hand, contended that withdrawal of the fleet would make it impossible to maintain air and land bases on the shores of the Mediterranean and to aid Britain's allies in the Near East.¹⁵

The British government is following a policy somewhere between the two extremes. Most merchant shipping has been diverted to the Cape route, and at the same time an augmented fleet is maintained in the Mediterranean. The presence and activities of that fleet have aided materially in the battle for Libya, have insured aid for Greece, and have neutralized the effect of the loss of French aid in the Mediterranean basin.

The Suez Canal is the focus of Britain's strategic position in the Near East. Along the southward approach to the Canal, the Italians have been unable to exploit to any marked degree their control over 1,400 miles of coast line on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and 1,200 miles on the Indian Ocean. Six of the seven submarines known to be available south of Suez have been put out of action;^{15a} the

12. Italian East Africa is virtually self-sufficient in foodstuffs, but produces no oil or critical minerals and has no manufacturing of any importance. *Bulletin of International News*, August 24, 1940, pp. 1066-67; *Development of Italian East Africa* (New York, Italian Library of Information, 1940), *passim*.

13. Britain has withdrawn its recognition of Italian sovereignty over Ethiopia and brought Emperor Haile Selassie from England to the Sudan. On January 15 he crossed the border into Ethiopia and re-established his government. *The New York Times*, January 24, 1941.

14. Great distances and difficult terrain precluded any sizable land attack in this region. Axis agents could have influenced the natives, however. There are numerous airfields, and a British air line from Khartoum to Nigeria passes over Chad, the northernmost part of French Equatorial Africa.

14a. The Governor-General of the Belgian Congo announced on November 26, 1940 that the territory considered itself at war with Italy. *The New York Times*, November 27, 1940.

15. Royal Institute of International Affairs, *Political and Strategic Interests of the United Kingdom* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 127-30; George Slocumbe, *The Dangerous Sea* (New York, Macmillan, 1937), pp. 271-76.

15a. *The New York Times*, November 17, 1940.

attacks of surface vessels have been repulsed; and air bombing has not halted British shipping. From the fortified base at Aden and the small island of Perim in the Straits of Bab al Mendeb, the British have dominated the narrow mouth of the Red Sea, allowing transports from India and the Far East to continue up to Suez.

In the eastern Mediterranean, developments have tended to improve Britain's position on the sea and in the air. To the principal bases at Alexandria and Port Said and the secondary bases at Haifa and Cyprus have been added stations on the island of Crete and the Greek mainland. The effectiveness of the Italian air base at Rhodes and the naval center at Leros in the Dodecanese island group has thereby been much reduced and their supply lines endangered. The new bases in Greece also halve the flying distance of British bombing planes headed for Italy. In the central Mediterranean, the Axis holds the advantage through the use of planes, surface and subsurface craft. Malta has been virtually abandoned as a naval base because of its vulnerability to air attack, eliminating the only British naval station on the 1,900-mile route from Gibraltar to Alexandria.

EGYPT THE KEY TO THE NEAR EAST

In Near Eastern strategy, Egypt is the keystone of the British defense structure. As long as England retains its bases in Egypt and its hold on the Suez Canal, it remains a serious threat to Axis moves in the Mediterranean. Should the Axis gain control over Egypt, British power in the Near East would be at an end.

Lying on the land bridge which connects two great continents, Egypt commands lines of communication between the Orient and Europe. Through its eastern section passes the Suez Canal, one of the world's most strategic and most coveted waterways. In 1937 traffic through the canal reached a peak of 36,491,332 tons;¹⁶ in 1939 it had decreased to 29,573,000 tons. In the latter year vessels under the British flag accounted for 51.4 per cent of the tonnage, and Italian ships were second with 14.4 per cent.¹⁷ Shipping along the route from Suez to Gibraltar through the Mediterranean has now virtually ceased, although British trade with Turkey, Greece and the Levant countries via the canal has recently been resumed. Beyond its commercial value, which is distinctly decreased, the canal permits ships of the British navy to pass at will between the Mediterranean and the high seas, giving them a mobility that the Axis navies lack.

16. A. Siegfried, *Suez and Panama* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1940), p. 128.

17. *The Economist*, August 10, 1940.

Egypt also dominates the land routes to the east. From Cairo a railway runs through Palestine and Syria to connect with the Turkish system. With two changes of gauge, one can travel from Cairo to Haider Pasha, opposite Istanbul, and with three changes to Basra on the Persian Gulf.¹⁸

An asphalted road from Cairo through Palestine and across the Syrian desert to Baghdad is being rapidly pushed to completion by British engineers. This will provide an alternative route to the Euphrates Valley and the Gulf. Since the advent of world-wide airplane travel, Egypt has become a vital junction for air routes from Europe to India and beyond. At Alexandria a British airway reaches the length of Africa to the Cape.

BACKGROUND OF ANGLO-EGYPTIAN RELATIONS

Egypt's relations with the world are determined by British imperial policy. The British occupied Egypt in 1882 because through its eastern section runs the Suez Canal, principal shipping route to the Orient. This geographical fact has been the determining element in Anglo-Egyptian relations ever since, although the form and the method of protecting British interests have varied from time to time.

After the first World War, British imperialism was faced with a new nationalist movement in Egypt. In long, heated negotiations it seemed impossible for representatives of the two states to agree on a definitive relationship between them.¹⁹ Then in 1936 a formal treaty of alliance²⁰ was concluded between the two countries and each undertook "not to adopt an attitude inconsistent with the alliance." In the event of one party going to war, the other engaged to come immediately to his aid "in the capacity of an ally." The King of Egypt's obligations, in case Britain became involved in war, were to furnish to the British "on Egyptian territory . . . all the facilities and assistance in his power, including the use of his ports, aerodromes, and means of communications" and to take appropriate administrative and legislative measures including the establishment of martial law and an effective censorship. In return for this pledge of assistance in time of emergency, the British government promised to withdraw its troops gradually to the Suez Canal Zone. The Egyptian government agreed to construct stra-

18. For a detailed description, cf. "Strategic Transportation Routes in Northern Africa and the Near East," *Foreign Railway News*, June 21, 1940, pp. 246-48.

19. Cf. *Great Britain and Egypt, 1914-1936* (London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1936).

20. "Treaty of Alliance between . . . the United Kingdom and . . . Egypt, August 26, 1936, Exchanges of Notes, and Agreed Minute," Cmd. 5360 (London, H.M. Stationery Office, 1937).

tegic roads and railways in the Canal Zone, the Nile delta and along the coasts, and to construct barracks and other facilities for the British garrison.

The British government also undertook to open negotiations regarding the removal of servitudes resented by Egypt, and to make that country more independent of foreign control. The system of capitulations under which the nationals of certain European and American states enjoyed special rights and privileges in Egypt was terminated by an international convention signed by the twelve capitulatory powers in May 1937.²¹ The Public Debt Commission, instituted by Great Britain and other European states in 1876 to superintend Egyptian financial practices, was dissolved by two agreements between Egypt, Great Britain and France, signed in July and August 1940.²² As further evidence of Egypt's attainment of full sovereignty, Great Britain successfully sponsored its entrance into the League of Nations on May 26, 1937.

The concessions made to Egypt undoubtedly led many Britishers to expect that the subjects of King Farouk would stand shoulder to shoulder with them in any conflict involving the protection of empire communications and of Egypt itself. British guidance, capital and trade had helped the Egyptians to make their nation the most advanced and wealthiest of the Arab states. Britain had then begun to relinquish its special position in Egypt at some material cost and strategic sacrifice. While anti-British feeling in Egypt diminished as a result of the 1936 treaty, it cannot be said that hostile feeling toward Britain had disappeared entirely when the present conflict started. Grievances against the protecting power were voiced continually by the Wafd and other extremist groups. British troops were still stationed in Egyptian cities, and British planes still flew overhead. Britain remained the influential partner in the condominium of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, a region which the nationalists claimed was ethnically and geographically a part of Egypt. It was said that the British refused to allow Egypt to enlarge and modernize its army to a point where it could claim the duty of protecting the Suez Canal. In Egyptian commerce and industry, British capital is still dominant, a fact which is resented by a rising Egyptian financier class. Under these cir-

cumstances, it was difficult to predict what course of action the Egyptian government would adopt and what the attitudes of the Egyptian people would be if Britain became involved in a major conflict.

EGYPTIAN GOVERNMENT AND THE WAR

On September 3, 1939, the day London declared war on Germany, the Egyptian government was obligated to take various steps specified in the Treaty of 1936. Immediately it severed diplomatic and commercial relations with the Reich and issued a decree proclaiming the kingdom to be in a "state of siege."²³ Under a law passed in 1923, the government may declare a state of siege when the safety of the state is endangered by internal disorder or by "the menace of invasion by armed enemy forces." It may then institute a complete censorship of publications and means of communication, establish martial law in specified zones or in the whole country, regulate the movements of all persons, requisition transport facilities, factories and buildings, and establish courts-martial to punish infractions of any emergency decrees.²⁴ Accordingly, the government established a thoroughgoing censorship, sequestered German property, interned or expelled German nationals, instituted a control of exports and foreign exchange, and marked out special areas in Alexandria, Cairo, the Canal Zone and the western desert where the local governors and military were given the widest powers.²⁵

As long as the conflict was confined to northern Europe, this was sufficient. But when the Mediterranean situation became tense in May 1940, the government took additional measures in consultation with the British. The army was authorized to evacuate the inhabitants of western desert towns, general blackouts were ordered on May 26, and a round-up of suspects was instituted. On June 10 Italy declared war on Britain, and two days later the Egyptian government severed relations with Rome and took action against Italians in Egypt similar to that taken against the Germans. Italy, hoping to create dissension in Cairo, did not at once withdraw its Minister, who was not persuaded to leave until June 19, accompanied by 121 members of his staff and 111 other Italians. The Italian invasion of Egypt in September brought yet another extension of the government's emergency

21. "Convention Regarding the Abolition of Capitulations in Egypt," May 8, 1937, Cmd. 5491 (London, H.M. Stationery Office, 1937). Extracts in *Documents on International Affairs*, 1937, cited, pp. 469-70. Cf. J. Y. Brinton, "Egypt: The Transition Period," *American Journal of International Law*, April 1940, pp. 208-19. The jurisdiction of the Mixed Courts continues in a modified form until 1949.

22. *Convention relative à l'abolition de la Caisse de la Dette Publique Egyptienne*, Anglo-Egyptian, July 17, 1940; *Journal Officiel*, August 1, 1940. Same convention, Franco-Egyptian, August 3, 1940; *ibid.*, August 15, 1940.

23. *Journal Officiel*, Numéro Extraordinaire, September 2, 1939. The decrees and proclamations relating to the state of siege and published up to November 30 are collected in the *Recueil des décrets-lois, arrêtés, proclamations* (Editions du Journal du Commerce et de la Marine, Alexandria, n.d.).

24. *Law No. 15 of 1923; Recueil*, cited, pp. 3-5.

25. *Journal Officiel*, *passim*; *Recueil*, *passim*.

powers. Martial law was widened to apply to all parts of the country and to all persons who would come within its purview in time of war. Public servants who intentionally failed to fulfill their duties and thus impeded national defense were made liable to fine and imprisonment.²⁶ Already the government had decreed that strikes and lockouts in defense industries were illegal. Technically, at least, the Egyptian government has fulfilled its obligations to its ally, Britain.

Egypt still considers its position in the present conflict that of a neutral although, according to international law, its conduct has been unneutral, affording ample legal grounds for protest and a declaration of war by Italy. Belligerent troops are operating on Egyptian soil, belligerent warships are using Egyptian harbors, and military operations are taking place with Egypt as a base. Thus far, Rome has withheld a declaration of war, apparently hoping thereby to propitiate friendly groups in Egypt and other Arab countries. And although Italians have bombed Egypt's cities, killed its people, and invaded its territory, Egypt has refused to declare itself an active party in the war. To understand Egypt's paradoxical position and attitude requires an examination of recent developments in its external and internal politics.

EGYPTIAN ATTITUDE TOWARD THE WAR

At the head of the Egyptian state in both a titular and a real sense stands the King, Farouk, now 21 and the youngest active ruler in the world. He is ambitious and apparently has aspirations to obtain the large share of power wielded by his father. He also inherited a sympathy for Italy which six months of schooling in England has not seriously modified. In his struggle for power against the political parties, Farouk relies on the religious leaders and the *fellaheen* (small farmers) for continued support, and on a Palace clique for advice. Prominent among the latter is the Shaikh al Maraghi, rector of Al Azhar, Islam's greatest university, and reputed leader of a movement to declare Farouk the rightful Caliph of Islam.²⁷ Farouk has recently been described both as "the chief Quisling" in Egypt²⁸ and as an unqualified adherent of the British cause.²⁹ Fundamentally he is neither. He pursues the course which will, in the long run, enhance his personal power and prestige in Egypt.

Egypt is a constitutional monarchy with a Prime Minister and a Cabinet responsible to a popularly elected Chamber of Deputies. It has also a number of political parties, but it would be erroneous to assume that the parliamentary system operates as it does in European states with similar institutions. The influence of the Palace is marked, and political parties tend to be groups of personal followers of several leaders. In so far as the parties are differentiated by programs, party lines are drawn according to three sets of attitudes—"towards Great Britain, the Palace, and the Demos."³⁰ The largest single party is the Wafd, founded by Saad Zaghlul Pasha in 1924 and representative of the extreme nationalist point of view. Its leaders are suspicious of Britain and demand immediate termination of Britain's special position in Egypt. They constitute the chief opposition to the Palace and advocate a native form of proletarianism which sometimes resembles the new revolutionary parties in Europe.³¹ Dissident Wafdists who found the party leaders too intransigent formed in 1937 a new organization, with liberal, moderately nationalist views, called the Saadist Wafd party. The third principal group is the Liberal Constitutional party, moderate in outlook and supported by the upper classes and intellectuals. In the last elections, in 1937, the Liberals emerged with the largest bloc in the Chamber, due to a split in the Wafd and questionable practices at the polls.³²

When the European war began, the Prime Minister was Ali Maher Pasha, a vigorous non-party man with the support of Saadists and independents. He took the measures outlined above in fulfillment of Egypt's obligations under the alliance, stating that "the Government and people of Egypt are heart and soul with Britain in the great struggle for justice and the preservation of freedom."³³ Through 1939 and the first half of 1940, he worked in close collaboration with the British and yet succeeded in retaining his office. When Italy entered the conflict, serious internal dissension arose in high circles. Ali Maher appears to have demanded an immediate declaration of war, but the Chamber would not give its assent. He had to be content with a declaration that Egypt would take an active part in the hostilities if, in the future, the Italians invaded Egyptian

30. Walter H. Mallory, ed., *Political Handbook of the World, 1940* (New York, Council on Foreign Relations, 1940), p. 56.

31. For example, the Wafd launched in 1936 a movement for its young men called the "Blue-shirts," which in organization and ritual resembled the Fascist Black-shirts and the Nazi S.A. and S.S. *Great Britain and Egypt*, p. 44. It was disbanded in 1938 by the government after gaining 20,000 members.

32. Of the 264 members of the Chamber of Deputies, 93 are Liberal Constitutionalists, 89 Saadists, 13 Wafdists, 47 Independents, and 22 belong to other small parties. *Political Handbook*, cited, 1940, p. 54.

33. *Bulletin of International News*, September 23, 1939, p. 22.

26. *Journal Officiel*, September 22, 1940.

27. A. Settel, "The Power Behind Egypt's Throne," *Living Age*, November 1940, pp. 225-32.

28. A. Viton, "Britain and the Axis in the Near East," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1941, p. 377.

29. J. A. Smith, "King Farouk: Friend of Britain," *Empire Review*, July 1940, pp. 44-46.

territory, bombarded Egyptian towns, or carried out air raids against Egyptian military objectives.³⁴ Further than that the Chamber would not go, and on June 19 Ali Maher resigned.

The Cabinets which have governed Egypt since that time have pursued a middle-of-the-road policy with the benevolent approval of the Palace. Ali Maher's successor, Hassan Sabry Pasha, refused to declare war even after the bombing of Alexandria and Cairo³⁵ and the Italian invasion of the western desert. He was content to send a note of protest to Rome. Following Sabry's dramatic death at the opening of Parliament on November 14, Hussein Sirry Pasha, a technical expert with no party backing, was chosen by the King to succeed Sabry and carry on his policy.

The government's attitude has been criticized from both sides. The recently re-elected president of the Chamber, Ahmed Maher Pasha, strongly urges Egyptian participation in the war beside its ally as the best protection of Egyptian interests.³⁶ His following is not large, however. On the other side, the Wafd, seeking to make political capital out of the situation, attacks the government for cooperating with the British. It charges that the Anglo-Egyptian alliance benefits only Britain, that Egyptian commerce and finance are needlessly disrupted by the war, and that Britain has promised no concessions at the close of the conflict.³⁷

The great mass of the people prefer to commit the nation to neither side while awaiting the outcome of the war. Very few Egyptians are moved by ideological convictions to support the cause of the democracies. The long British occupation has left a feeling of Anglophobia which runs deep. Anti-British feeling, moreover, has been diligently fostered in the past five or six years by propagandists of the Axis countries, especially Italy. Radio programs from Bari and Zeesen,³⁸ pamphlets distributed in the streets and rumors spread by agents picture the British in an unfavorable light. The broadcasters have been especially diligent in exploiting Arab-Jewish enmity in Palestine, the dark pages in the history of British imperialism, and recently the

sudden death of Sabry Pasha.³⁹ A large Italian colony of 70,000, ranging from influential merchants to artisans, was and, to a smaller extent, still is an important channel for Fascist ideas.⁴⁰

Even more impressive than words are accomplishments in war. Egyptians have been impressed by the German victory in western Europe and, until recently, by Italy's armed might. Some think that the Axis powers will triumph, and that Egypt's share in the new order will be greater if it does not oppose them. On the other hand, Britain has given no indication that it will reward Egypt for its aid. Thus far the restoration of the *status quo ante bellum* is the most that London has promised. Between the dynamic Axis powers, still at a distance, and the more static British closer at hand, Egypt prefers not to make a choice until a choice becomes inevitable, or until the outcome of the struggle is clear.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS IN EGYPT

The operation of economic factors in Egypt since the outbreak of the war has not tended to improve relations with Great Britain. Egypt is primarily an agricultural country with only a few industrial plants, and its economy is dependent on foreign trade. In normal times the country exports large quantities of raw materials and foodstuffs, of which cotton accounts for about 72 per cent.⁴¹ Its best customers have been Great Britain, France and Germany, in the order named.⁴² In return, Egypt purchases abroad textiles, fertilizers, iron and steel products, machinery, and other manufactured goods. Its principal suppliers in 1937 were Great Britain (21.8 per cent), Germany (11 per cent), and Belgium (6 per cent).⁴³

The opening of the European war produced a speculative boom in Egypt, which ended suddenly early in 1940.⁴⁴ Business continued at a slightly depressed but steady level until June, when Italy entered the war.

This second impact on Egyptian economy was serious. Commercial relations with Italy were completely severed; France and the French colonies

34. *The New York Times*, June 13, 1940.

35. The Prime Minister announced on December 2 that Italian air raids had killed 155 Egyptians and injured 425 others, all civilians. *The New York Times*, December 3, 1940; cf. also *ibid.*, October 22, 1940.

36. For a translation of his statement in *Al Musawwar* (Cairo) of July 26, 1940, cf. *Asiatic Review*, October 1940, pp. 875-76.

37. For Wafd memorial asking for concessions, presented to the British Ambassador on April 1, 1940, cf. *Oriente Moderno*, May 1940, pp. 228-31; for memorandum to the King of January 1941, cf. *The New York Times*, January 5, 1941.

38. Radio is an important factor in Egyptian politics. There were 100,000 receivers in 1937; *The Times* (London), Egypt Number, January 26, 1937.

39. Viton, "Britain and the Axis in the Near East," cited, pp. 375-76.

40. Elizabeth Monroe, *The Mediterranean in Politics* (London, Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 197-203.

41. *International Trade Statistics, 1937* (Geneva, League of Nations, 1938), p. 156. Egypt is the world's third largest exporter of cotton, contributing an average of 14 per cent annually of the total exports of cotton for the period 1934-35 to 1938-39. *Commerce Reports*, September 7, 1940, p. 760.

42. In 1937 Great Britain took 30.9 per cent, France 10.6 per cent, and Germany 8.3 per cent of Egypt's exports. *International Trade Statistics, 1937*, p. 154.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *The Economist*, February 24, 1940, p. 333.

ceased foreign trading; shipping through the Mediterranean was halted; few bottoms were available at Red Sea ports; and British industry concentrated on production for the war effort. Egypt's foreign trade dropped sharply.⁴⁵ Its merchants could not sell abroad and, even with the limited amount of foreign exchange they possessed, could find few sources of goods to be purchased.⁴⁶ As a result, many important manufactures and raw materials became scarce, and prices of available supplies soared.⁴⁷ Due to the general uncertainty, hoarding began. "The credit and collection situation deteriorated, bank deposits decreased, and note circulation expanded. Industrial activity receded."⁴⁸ The various dislocations produced by the war have thrown at least 100,000 out of work.

Financial measures taken by the government have not alleviated the situation. Faced with falling customs revenues—an important item in the budget⁴⁹—the government increased income and stamp taxes, which were imposed for the first time last year.⁵⁰ Expenditures for public works and social welfare have been curtailed, while that for defense is constantly rising. In a country which produces its own armaments, increased expenditures for defense would stimulate industry, but Egypt is forced to buy most of its munitions abroad.

Two factors have tended to alleviate the economic depression which has struck Egypt. First, on August 6 the British government came forward with a plan to stabilize cotton prices and assure a market for the thousands of small cotton cultivators in the Nile Valley. A commission provided with funds from Britain is purchasing all the cotton and cottonseed offered to it during the 1940-41 season, at prices slightly below world prices.⁵¹ The commission will then attempt to dispose of the crop, either to British or foreign spinners. The British government will bear any loss resulting from the operation

of this plan, and will share any profit equally with the Egyptian government.⁵²

A second factor is the rising rate of expenditure of the British forces in Egypt, which has been estimated as high as £20 million annually, and compares favorably with Egypt's total exports of £40,630,000 in 1937.⁵³ Further financial aid from London will probably be forthcoming soon in the form of a loan to the Cairo government.

On balance, the economic situation in Egypt at the present time and the outlook for the immediate future are uncertain, although Egypt is far better off than any of its neighbors in the Near East. The vicissitudes of the past months have already produced much resentment against the British, however, and Egyptian nationalists as well as Axis agents may succeed in exploiting unrest even further in the future.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION

The opposing forces in the Mediterranean region have reached a temporary deadlock—in Libya, in East Africa, in Greece, and in the waters of the central portion of the inland sea. The balance is an unstable one, however, and there is every reason to believe that there will be significant developments in the near future.

Britain and its allies have gained unexpected victories against Italy since October, and may possess the necessary material and moral superiority to eliminate that country from the war. A direct invasion of the Italian homeland would be very difficult, however, and Allied strategy will probably include only a close blockade of the Italian mainland, coupled with severe bombing raids, in the hope of producing internal dissension in Italy and ultimately the overthrow of the present régime.

Before Italy's withdrawal from the war, however, it is to be expected that Hitler will intervene in the Mediterranean situation in a more direct and effective manner than he has hitherto done. Such an intervention could take several forms. Already large numbers of German air units are reported moving southward in Italy, and may soon be followed by Nazi troops. The presence of German forces would serve to strengthen Italian resistance and cover Germany's southern flank. Until it is definitely estab-

45. While foreign trade in the first half of 1940 was somewhat ahead of previous years, both imports and exports for July 1940 were substantially under 1939. Imports in July 1940 were £E328,343, as compared with £E3,024,116 in 1939. Exports for the same month in 1940 were £E788,154, as compared with £E1,993,415 in 1939. Kingdom of Egypt, Ministry of Finance, *Monthly Summary of Foreign Trade*, July 1940, pp. 6-7. The publication of trade statistics ceased in July, but it is apparent that the downward trend has continued.

46. Egypt hopes to increase trade with the United States, and is sending a commercial attaché and commercial counselor to Washington for this purpose. *The New York Times*, January 6, 1941.

47. "Egyptian Trade and Finance," *Great Britain and the East*, July 11, 1940, p. 38; *Foreign Commerce Weekly*, October 5, 1940, p. 12.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Of the total receipts of £E35,152,200 in the fiscal year 1936-37, customs revenues accounted for £E17,203,500, or 48 per cent, an average figure.

50. "Egyptian Trade and Finance," cited.

51. On November 7 the commission had purchased 279,464 bales of cotton and 8,241,000 bushels of cottonseed, for which it had paid £E7,196,000. This may be compared with the value of Egyptian exports of cotton and cottonseed in 1937, which was £E30,852,000. Kingdom of Egypt, Ministry of Finance, *Weekly Cotton Bulletin*, November 4, 1940.

52. *The Economist*, October 5, 1940, p. 430.

53. *Ibid.*

54. For Wafd memorial to the British Ambassador, dated April 1, 1940, cf. *Oriente Moderno*, May 1940, pp. 228-31.

lished that bombing planes can control the waters of the central Mediterranean, Britain's preponderance in sea power will continue to place the Axis partners at a disadvantage by putting them on the defensive. Hitler will probably not risk sending large bodies of troops and mechanized units to Libya to aid Marshal Graziani's army, for the lines of communication lie over the sea and would be exposed to interruption by Britain.

German intervention may be launched on a much larger scale toward either the eastern or the western end of the Mediterranean, thus shutting the British out of the middle sea. The Reich is a great military power, and if it cannot come to grips directly with British naval forces, it can weaken British strength by encroaching on the narrow channels which give access to the Mediterranean—the Straits of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal.

The German road to Gibraltar lies through Spain and requires at least the passive approval of France. Although General Franco has apparently been urged several times to join the Axis and participate in an assault on the Rock, he has refused up to the present. His people are exhausted by the recent civil war; his resources, especially in food-stuffs, are low, since Spain is dependent on sea-borne commerce; and his control of the state is not completely assured. The German army, acting alone, could possibly attempt to seize Gibraltar, but its lines of supply would be long and uncertain. Moreover, the high command in Berlin appears reluctant to open up new and distant theatres of war.

The policy of the Vichy government is still obscure. Marshal Pétain and his advisers seem to be striving to preserve as much independence of action as the situation permits. The only weapons Vichy holds are the army under General Weygand in North Africa⁵⁵ and the remaining units of the French fleet in Mediterranean harbors.⁵⁶ By threatening to turn these assets over to Britain, who would

then command most of the North African coast, the French have been able to resist demands from Berlin for the passage of troops and the use of the French fleet and naval bases. Since German control of Gibraltar would seriously weaken the French position in North Africa, it is likely that Vichy would probably use what power it can muster to forestall a Nazi movement against the Rock.

Hitler can threaten Britain's forces in the Mediterranean more effectively by utilizing the army he now has concentrated in Rumania. By striking at the Greek northern flank through Bulgaria or Yugoslavia and then moving down into the central part of Greece, the German mechanized divisions could occupy the country in short order. From Greece, the Germans could send bombing planes to Egypt and submarines to harass the British warships. Again, however, the conquest would be sterile if the British fleet remained in strength in the eastern Mediterranean. An Axis drive across Turkey is almost outside the realm of possibility, for the German army would find its supply lines lengthened greatly and the terrain most difficult to cross.

Any radical revision of the present *status quo* in the Near East will be closely watched by Soviet Russia, which has consistently indicated an interest in control of the Dardanelles. Whether Stalin would resist by force a German move toward the Straits is problematical, but the possibility must condition German discussions of the question.

While all the great powers in Europe demonstrate an active concern in developments in the Mediterranean, it must be borne in mind that, in the last analysis, events in that region will not determine the final outcome of the European conflict. Even if the British obtain control over all the lands bordering the inland sea, they will still have to overcome the Germans in their citadel in northern Europe before the war can be decided. Conversely, the Axis could achieve domination over the Mediterranean without noticeably reducing the power of British arms in and around the British Isles.

55. The present strength of the army in North Africa is the subject of much conjecture. The Vichy government stated that only four divisions, roughly 60,000 men, were in North Africa at the time of the German armistice. *The New York Times*, November 10, 1940. American newspapermen place the number as high as 500,000. *Christian Science Monitor*, December 3, 1940; *New York Sun*, December 5, 1940. Probably there are 200,000 French and native troops available. Their supplies are limited, and they are deficient in some categories of weapons.

56. At Toulon the French have the battleship *Strasbourg*, damaged in its flight from Oran, 8 to 10 cruisers, 40 destroyers, and an undetermined number of smaller vessels and submarines. Major George Fielding Eliot, *New York Herald Tribune*, October 24, 1940. There are additional units in North African harbors and at Dakar.

The February 15 issue of FOREIGN POLICY REPORTS will be:

AUSTRALIA'S ROLE IN THE EUROPEAN CONFLICT

by James Frederick Green